

<crew talk>

Q: The following oral history interview was conducted by Art Gomez with the National Park Service and Commander Bill Scullian [ph?] of the Naval Historical Center, Washington, D.C., for the National Park Service USS Arizona Memorial. The interview was conducted at the Ala Moana Hotel in Honolulu on December 6, 2001 at 1:45 p.m. The person being interviewed is Charles B. Conley, who was a Seaman First Class on the USS Phoenix, CL 46 on December 7, 1941. Mr. Conley, for the record please state your full name, place of birth.

Charles Ben Conley: Charles B. Conley, Burke County, North Carolina, July 2, 1922.

Q: What did you consider your hometown in 1941?

Charles Ben Conley: Morganton.

Q: What were your parents' names?

Charles Ben Conley: Robert Conley and Jane Conley.

Q: How many brothers and sisters do you or did you have?

Charles Ben Conley: Three brothers and two sisters. And their names is R-Robert and uh.. Lee, and Owens. My sisters' names was Amy and Faye. And th-they uh.. they had defense jobs, too. One of them- one of them worked at Oak Ridge. And I've signed them up for the World War II memorial.

Q: Where did you go to high school?

Charles Ben Conley: Morganton.

Q: At what time did you enlist in the United States Navy and what caused you to enlist in the Navy?

Charles Ben Conley: Uh.. well, you know, they wasn't too far to going start drafting. And I had some friends at- in the Navy. And I- I liked the looks of the uniform pretty good. So I decided to go to Asheville, where I listed, and took my test and was sworn in at Raleigh and went on six weeks of training at Norfolk. It was a mighty short time, but they- we learned quite a bit, drills, which that didn't help us too much. _____ was a good marksman before he went in the Navy. And uh.. we uh.. got one nine-day leave and went home and come back and went across the states on a train. And I didn't drink, didn't smoke. Twenty-one dollars a month was all you made then. So I went on leave and I had a little money left. Most guys spent it all and the guys that smoked wanted to borrow money. So what I did is bought two or three packs of tobacco where they roll it, and I'd give them cigarette- cigarette every once in a while. But uh.. went on to California and uh.. went aboard the Phoenix and uh..

Q: What year is this?

Charles Ben Conley: '40.

Q: What month?

Charles Ben Conley: Uh.. November uh.. Thanksgiving Day is when we went aboard. I still got the menu from the- the dinner. Still got it today. Good dinner.

Q: So you were assigned to the USS Phoenix?

Charles Ben Conley: Yeah.

Q: And what was your duty station?

Charles Ben Conley: Uh.. I was uh.. trying to become a lookout and uh.. we went to Long Beach for two or three days, into Honolulu and from Honolulu we'd go out gunnery practice and three crews would zig-zag. See, we didn't have radar then. And uh.. it zig-zagged three crews. As you know, a submarine couldn't pick you up too good. And I got to be a hails man. That- that crew, they had to ra- the visit was stand whale watches, but uh.. prior to s- that crew would uh.. stand whale watches and I enjoyed it. And uh.. we

finally come back in and operated out of Honolulu to uh.. September '41. And uh.. we started bringing supplies aboard and the boat deck, two- two 50-foot motor launches and two 30-foot, and two whale boats, pretty good space for potatoes topside, not- not- not in the freezer or nothing. And we- we couldn't figure out what- what- where we was going. And uh.. you know how scuttlebutt gets started. And uh.. the captain said the- the captain was Captain Fisher. You ever hear of him? Good captain. And uh.. he said we's under sealed orders and they'd let us know after we got out to sea. We got out to sea and they told us we's going to the Philippines to escort a Army transport full of supplies for the Army and the Marines in the Philippines. And hit a big tornado there going over. Couldn't change course, because we got uh.. orders not to change course. And I didn't think we'd ever get out of the storm. And I was standing whale watching, but- but before then I was seasick three months. And you could cut your brother's head off and not bat an eye. That's if you've ever been sick. Got over it just as quick as I got seasick to start off with. And when we went h- that uh.. hurricane, I felt good. And you know the Marines and the Navy, there's a little bit of friction there. And uh.. when I's seasick they gave me holy hell. And uh.. when we hit that storm some had been there 20 years got seasick. And it was my payback time. But we went on to uh.. Philippines. We charted the waters around uh.. Zamboanga. Uh.. they claim the only charts they had through some of them islands what sailing vessels had taken. And uh.. they knew the- the fleet operated around and was going to have to know the depth of the water. And we done that with a lifeline, a piece of steel, just like an O-wind weight on a line and markers up and down it and throw it out and you just barely moving. For two weeks we done that. And finally come back to the Pearl Harbor and we'd- we'd missed our gunnery practice. See, a-all the light cruisers goes out together in gunnery practice and we'd missed that and we had to go out by ourself and practice. And uh..

Q: When did you return to Pearl Harbor? Do you remember what month it was?

Charles Ben Conley: Y-you mean after war?

Q: No after the Philippines.

Charles Ben Conley: Uh.. it was about sometime late October.

Q: Okay.

Charles Ben Conley: And it was in part of November when we was doing our gunnery practice.

Q: Okay.

Charles Ben Conley: And uh.. I spotted unidentified object in the water and reported them. Never heard what happened to it.

Q: Did you say object or objects? One or two?

Charles Ben Conley: Just one, several times.

Q: What did you think it was?

Charles Ben Conley: I didn't know. I didn't- I didn't hear of any _____ submarines then. But uh.. I still say it was a Jap submarine.

Q: Was this in November or December?

Charles Ben Conley: It was in November.

Q: While you were out doing the gunnery practice?

Charles Ben Conley: Yeah. G-gunnery practice. We went out several days uh.. uh.. gunnery practice. And we- we got in. Now I can't remember this date, only two or three days before the attack. And uh.. I got up Sunday morning I had duty. I'd never had duty on Sunday before, never, especially in port. And uh.. we assigned our boat crew and we uh.. I got up at 6:00, ate chow, and walked below deck. Y-you don't have to have a cap on. So I went up s-stern, up through the hatch, was out of cap and they- and they- they called our boat away so you follow orders. W-went out on the Jacob's ladder and got in the boat and went to the- along the gangway. And uh.. see we tied up the gangway. This Marine officer was head officer today. And boy, it was on, chewing me out with me being out of uniform. He said, "Shut your mouth and stand at attention!" And that's what I done.

Q: Mr. Conley, before we get to the actual events of December 7th, I want to take you back a little bit to the time you spotted the submarine. There are two questions I have in mind. What kind of training did you have as an observer to identify Japanese vessels or Japanese aircraft? Was there a formal training that the Navy--?

Charles Ben Conley: Oh, yeah. You had ships uh.. was at the planes and- and the pictures of ships. And you had to learn them and be able to identify them. But in the water, they's uh.. saw a object. You couldn't-- d- d- there's no o-outline of a shape, whether it's a sub or some big floating object. But uh.. there's nothing that big that floats out there.

Q: Then once you had recognition of this unidentified object, what was the procedure for reporting?

Charles Ben Conley: Over the phone. O-officer of the day. See, all- all lookout stations had a phone next to it. And called them up and reported it. This- this was two lookouts s-spotted it. Not just me, two of us.

Q: And the other two lookouts reported this as well?

Charles Ben Conley: Yeah, they reported the same thing as I did. I- I's a pretty good lookout.

Q: So far as you know, nothing was ever-- There was no response?

Charles Ben Conley: No, nothing. They co- later on, they said there's no- there wasn't no Jap subs out there at that time. But who knows? Uh.. there could have been. And uh..

Q: When you were in the Philippines and sailing to the Philippines, you said you had sealed orders until you got out to sea.

Charles Ben Conley: Honest.

Q: What was the crew thinking at that time? Was there any awareness among the crew?

Charles Ben Conley: Well they- the whole crew knew the war was just a matter of months. But nobody dreamed it'd been Pearl Harbor. They figured the Japs in China fighting and they would hit the Philippines, you know, it's- it was a surprise that they would be so foolish to come this far and uh.. like they did.

Q: So when you had orders to sail to the Philippines, you were told that's where you were headed. Was there any uneasiness among the crew that something had actually started?

Charles Ben Conley: No, no. They- some of them they's just glad to be going to the Philippines. Some of them h-had already been there. And- and in fact, some of them had served on the- the old destroyer four-stackers, old rusted, wasn't even safe to be on, let alone go out to sea. But they would tell about what a good liberty and place it was. They- we went to Zamboanga and uh.. that's where we charted the waters. And uh.. this officer I seen the 50th wedding anniversary. He claims we didn't go there to chart the waters. He claims we went there, the captain's mess cook was from there and he wanted him to have a little time with his family. Now that's- that's the say-so of this captain. He- he died t-two years ago.

Q: Let me go ahead and bring you now to the events of December 7th. You told us you were not on the ship at the time of the attack.

Charles Ben Conley: No. The ga-gangway. And uh..

Q: And you had just been advised that you were supposed to have your cap on.

Charles Ben Conley: Yeah, chewed out real good.

Q: And what happened next?

Charles Ben Conley: Well, uh.. they uh.. piped colors on five minutes to eight always, the boat's mate. Was-- do they still do that?

Q: Oh, yeah.

Charles Ben Conley: And uh.. they just got two blowing the piping for the colors, maybe half a minute, and uh.. I seen the Japanese planes come I forget which is west here now, coming over the cane fields, just- just barely over them. Were mostly destroyers where the carriers should have been anchored or tied up. And they hadn't even dropped a bomb or fired or anything. You could see them as they passed the big rising sun, just like a new coat of paint had been put on it. And they- some of them's fighters. And uh.. I don't believe there's any torple- torpedo planes with that bunch. There's some bombers. And they come straight over, dropped a bomb, flew right over us and swirled back. And uh.. we got firing pretty early. S- there's a few ships was firing before we did, the destroyers. And uh.. we had ammunition up uh.. on the top side. These quads was open on the Phoenix, the five inch, .25 caliber short barrel. And we started firing and uh.. the explosion would go 100 feet above and explode. And you'd had to- to knock them down, you'd had to get a direct hit. And you don't get many direct hit with a five inch gun. And we had two- two uh.. 50 gallon machine guns. They's water cooled. And we had three or four and the Marines brought out some of these rollout .30 caliber machine guns and uh.. fired. And but they's crossing over us both ways. Didn't fire a shot. No shells. We didn't even get a hit or a scratch. And uh.. we got a little steam up and uh.. oh, it must have been an hour uh.. the first attack was practically over and we started backing out and uh.. we's tied up to a buoy. And as we started to swing around, we got orders to tie back up. So we tied back up. And that's when the second attack come in and uh.. it was about 10:30 when we finally started moving out. And we went by the Arizona. You couldn't see her. Black smoke. That oil makes a real black smoke. We seen bodies all over the oil. Some of them you couldn't see. People don't realize how- how thick that oil is as them ships burn. And, in fact, cold weather it won't hardly run. We- we- we fuel at sea and uh.. some of it spilled. And it'd just lay on the deck in gobs. And uh.. and when it burned and it makes all the black smoke. And uh.. bodies all-- battleship row, there's bodies blowed off, some of them alive. And uh.. we's getting up pretty good speed then. And uh.. they say so. We went out of the harbor at 30 knots. Of course, I don't believe we had that much steam up to go- to go 3-30 knots. The cruising speed was 32 knots. That's what's in the manual. But she'd go 34.

Q: I'm going to take you back again. Now you're back on the Phoenix.

Charles Ben Conley: Yeah.

Q: And you haven't told us how you did that. You saw the Japanese planes coming into the harbor. There has been a lot of discussion about how people were confused and even thought that the Navy was doing some sort of training exercises. Did you feel that or were you pretty certain, from your perspective, this was a real attack?

Charles Ben Conley: I knew it was a real attack. For the Army- Army never did fly over at Pearl Harbor, as I can remember practicing, or the Navy either one. The only planes flew out would fly out Ford Island in uh.. but not the Army or Navy. They cl-claimed it was- they's running practice a s-surprise uh.. practice run. But that- that- that wasn't so. See, I say 60 percent of the Navy people was still in their bunks. Sunday people don't- half of them wouldn't even eat. And uh.. people said, "Well, it's by the ____." They- some of the Army, I've heard them make comments. They thought it was a practice. But that's- that's not right.

Q: What was your next reaction? Did you actually see those planes open fire?

Charles Ben Conley: Oh, yeah. I s- I seen them. See, I come a-- the Marine officer had us to come aboard and he told me to stay right there in case he wanted some messages run. And I stayed there, the gangway. And uh.. they uh.. you could see the bombs coming down. They don't fall that fast. And actually, torpedoes, you can see them way back there dropping the torpedoes, seeing all of that. Just- just like they's right on top of you.

Q: Did you witness any of the battleships that were hit? Did you see any of the hits?

Charles Ben Conley: I- I seen uh.. I'd have to go around to the other side, the uh.. and not being on a battle station, I was free to walk from side to side. And uh.. the- the captain run the board that morning. And I don't know when he come aboard, really. And uh.. I jumped from one side to the other and uh.. we had one five-inch gun and started getting bigger and bigger right in the center of it. It c- uh.. we had the five-inch, the short barrel, the- the- the-- all the rest of them, she's commissioned in '38, but after she's commissioned, they put longer barrels on them. But this one got bigger and bigger. And they finally stopped uh.. I believe the Marines was on that uh.. five-inch gun. They stopped it from firing.

Q: How did you get back to your ship?

Charles Ben Conley: How'd I get back to ship? I walked up the gangway. See, we turned the boat loose. We didn't even tie it up. And uh.. after it's- it got underway, I had to go to my lookout station, which on _____ the structure on the stern, about 40 feet up. And uh.. we were running out and I was lookout then. I seen two, two torpedo wakes go by the fence when we was going out. There's no- nothing in history or nobody, but I seem them and the Phoenix dodged them going out.

Q: So they went across the bow of the Phoenix?

Charles Ben Conley: Y-yeah, bow.

Q: And it went around the stern?

Charles Ben Conley: Yeah, they uh.. was kind of went to starboard and- and- and they just barely missed us. And uh.. we looked for the Japanese four days. And uh.. I's hoping we wouldn't find them. I know damn well with all them planes out there, we'd run across them, we's going to be sitting on the bottom in just a few minutes.

Q: You said there's a rather famous photo of your ship passing.

Charles Ben Conley: The Arizona. It's uh.. it's in most of the magazines. The St. U- St. Louis used to argue that it was the St. Louis. But Navy history, it was the Phoenix. We- we- we got the photograph six months later that it was the Phoenix.

Q: And by this time the Arizona had been sunk?

Charles Ben Conley: Oh, yeah. She- she's uh.. on fire and I guess she's on the- already on the bottom before I- we couldn't- you couldn't even s- the smoke was so thick, you couldn't even see her. Or you uh.. unless you see some of them Japanese photos, you don't realize how much smoke was out there. The whole row was smoke, and I went up 200 feet. And uh.. they uh.. guys standing. You could see a battleship every once in a while, a guy

standing on a deck throwing potatoes. I don't know why they's throwing that. The- the planes had already quit coming. The second attack was already over when we went out.

Q: I was going to ask you that. By the time the Phoenix got underway, the second attack had ended.

Charles Ben Conley: It was over. They's- They's over. There- there wasn't a plane in the air when we went out. And uh.. of course, we didn't know that's- that's the way it was, but that's what happened.

Q: So did the Phoenix leave the harbor, then?

Charles Ben Conley: Yeah, she left the harbor. She uh..

Q: Where did you proceed from there?

Charles Ben Conley: Uh.. there's four or five ships got together, the St. Louis and some guys was already out. And we got together a small group and looked for the Japanese fleet for four days. And did- and didn't run across them. Like I say, I ain't telling no lies, hoping we wouldn't find them. I had sense enough to know what's going to happen if they spotted us out there. Them aircraft carriers and them planes.

Q: Mr. Conley, you said you saw some torpedo wakes while you were exiting Pearl Harbor?

Charles Ben Conley: Going out.

Q: Where were you in the harbor when you saw those wakes?

Charles Ben Conley: What?

Q: Where were you in the harbor when you saw those wakes?

Charles Ben Conley: Oh, we's going out. We's already out of the harbor.

Q: So it was outside the mouth of the harbor?

Charles Ben Conley: Y-yeah, outside the harbor.

Q: It wasn't in the harbor?

Charles Ben Conley: No, huh-uh.

Q: About how far out of the harbor was it? Had you already cleared the net?

Charles Ben Conley: Oh yeah. We's- we's way out in the water, about 300 or 400 yards.

Q: Okay. Do you know which way they came from--the west or the east or from the south?

Charles Ben Conley: Uh.. going out of the harbor, they come this way. I- I can't get the- this is north?

Q: When you came out of the harbor, did you go straight ahead, or right?

Charles Ben Conley: No, we started straight out first. But we uh.. swirled to the left to miss them torpedoes.

Q: Okay. The torpedoes came from the starboard side?

Charles Ben Conley: Yeah. And uh.. not but two or three guys ever seen them. Nobody believes it. But I- I seen them. We shot at uh.. out of a-- we got on the other side of the Great Barrier Reef and we's shot at one time and missed the torpedo.

Q: Did they look the same way?

Charles Ben Conley: Yeah.

Q: So you got back to Pearl four days later. What is the damage? Could you see?

Charles Ben Conley: Oh, yeah. You could see everything. No smoke and no fires. And uh.. you didn't believe your eyes. And you didn't think them battleships, 16-inch armor. Hell, I would- I didn't think nothing would fire them up. But uh.. they's sharp enough to know to go through the decks. And uh.. they uh.. knew last week claims there's no torpedoes hit the Arizona. They were all bombs. Said something by- or uh.. ammunition exploding. That's what we figured, see-seeing uh.. how much smoke and flames. At first you could see the flames 200 feet in the sky. I- I didn't think fire would go that far. But it was a powerful explosion.

Q: Before we wrap this up, Mr. Conley, I just want to ask you one question. You're here. You were here ten years ago. You're here now for the 60th. That's great that you can keep doing this. What does this memorial mean to you?

Charles Ben Conley: Well, I'm glad to come back and honor th-the sailors and soldiers. But I get mad. See, I wasn't scared of nothing. I'm okay somewhat. I told a girl on the airplane sh-she said, "You wasn't scared?" I said, "No. I was madder than hell." She said, "Oh, hell. You was too damn young, 19." Says, "You were too damn young to be scared." And maybe she's right. But the first time-- my son's a good driver, but he's wrecked five cars growing up. And he tailgates people too much. Just like I'm from the South. In the North, if you ever drove in the North, then they tailgate people up there. Well that's the way he drives. But he's been dri- he drives uh.. 200,000 miles a year for La-Z-Boy in Georgia. And he never had a scratch on one since. But I got scared of him driving around the island the first time. And I tell him that and he gets madder than hell at me. <laughing> At least I tell the truth.

Q: Well, we're very proud to be here with you today to share this and share your story.

Charles Ben Conley: Uh.. I uh.. I've got several books that uh.. was wrote about the Phoenix. And the whole story of all of them. See, I didn't drink or smoke then. I was- been in three years before I'd even drink a beer.

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